



INTERDISTRICT SCHOOL FOR ARTS & COMMUNICATION

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Good afternoon Elected State Officials and leaders of Connecticut,

My name is Dr. Nicholas Spera, the Executive Director of ISAAC (Interdistrict School for Arts and Communication), a grade six thru eight middle school consisting of 276 wonderful students and 53 amazing staff members that is located in New London, CT. I speak today on **two** matters: **First, I ask for your support on HB:5283, a policy to fully fund all public school students based on their learning needs, not based on which type of public school they attend; Second, the request to provide charter schools like ISAAC with the access to funds to maintain and improve our school buildings.** In collaboration and partnership with the leaders within the Connecticut Charter Schools Association, I ask that **charter schools be added into the school construction program.**

Throughout my 21 years in education, I have held leadership positions in district public schools, the Connecticut Technical High School System, a magnet school, and now a charter school. My unique perspective of experiences in every type of public school in Connecticut allows me to accurately state that ***charter schools receive unequitable treatment and funding versus any other type of public school system or district in Connecticut.*** The inequity in funding and financial support are minimal compared to all other types of public schools in Connecticut. In contrast to the minimum financial support that our charter schools receive, our schools are held to the highest accountability measures and oversight versus any other public school district or system in Connecticut. You have heard today, prior to this testimony that charter schools like mine who serve over 80% of minority students are part of the 713-million-dollar racial funding gap that has existed since 2018. This figure is an absolute shame considering the equity efforts that are a responsibility of all of us who live and work in the United States of America.

In relationship to the aforementioned information, most charter schools were started in older school or office buildings with minimal funding for construction and improvements. Prior to COVID-19, charter schools were forced to use various grants or state tuition funding to make infrastructure improvements to support the curriculum and instruction within the school facility. Moreover, charter schools like mine, found themselves borrowing funds from banks which created budgetary constraints due to the inability to request additional funding through an increase in town funding or through other opportunities that exist for school districts through the state construction program.

Since the pandemic, charter leaders were faced with the difficulty of providing safe learning environments with limited funding beyond the Coronavirus Grants, ESSER II Grant, and the ARP ESSER Grant. Although these funds may be used to support needed facility upgrades, it was simply not enough money considering the rising construction costs and the balancing act of using the funds to support the achievement gap and social emotional needs of the students that sit in our charter classrooms. In the case of ISAAC, we are planning to add two classrooms for the purpose of providing a safer environment that allows for a 300% increase in course enrollment for band and chorus. This larger

space will safely allow more students to sing and play instruments during the current and future pandemic. The project also includes the plan to have a real science lab and an outdoor classroom for our students. Currently, ISAAC does not have a science lab and can only allow 16 students to safely sing or play an instrument in the band room.

The total estimated cost of this two-room expansion is estimated between \$1.7 to \$2.3 million dollars due to the increase in goods and inflation. With approximately \$900,000 available to be used on construction upgrades via the ARP ESSER Grant, ISAAC may be forced to borrow between \$800,000 to \$1.4 million from a financial institution. This is in addition to the approximately \$500,000 mortgage balance that remains from the last upgrade completed almost a decade ago. These types of upgrades are put on the individual charter school to fund independently. Costs like these put our schools in financial constraints for the immediate future which ultimately impacts the opportunity to hire additional staff to support the academic and social-emotional needs of our students.

Charter schools are state funded PUBLIC SCHOOLS. Prior to joining a charter school, I was also under the false assumption that charter schools are more like private schools. More notably, charter schools are subject to the most intensive oversight than any other group of public schools in the state including magnet schools, technical high schools, and traditional public schools. **It is time for our state officials to support every public school with fully equitable funding and opportunities.** I hope you will support the effort to include charter schools in the construction program so that we can improve teaching and learning conditions for ALL STUDENTS.

Sincerely,



Dr. Nicholas J. Spera
Executive Director

We Believe that All Students Can Succeed with Hard Work and Grit